

Flâneur on the Streets of Kyoto

Kajii Motojirō is usually considered to be an “I” novelist, since the author himself is the entire topic of his short stories, though consequent avoidance of exhibitionistic confessions, typical for *rokotsu naru byōsha* technique and proneness towards poetic description, places him on the periphery of the mainstream “I” novel.¹ He is also being classified as a modernist², due to aesthetic orientation of his work and visible influence of European modernist writers and philosophers.

Lemon, written in 1925, appears to be at the point of intersection of those two seemingly exclusive yet complementary tendencies in Kajii’s writing, which makes this short story such an exceptional literary work. By complementary, here I mean a manner, in which self-centred and self-oriented description converges with the creation of a modernist subjectivity in a harmonious synergy.

My paper aims at singling out and describing the protagonist’s character, which can be best described as *flâneur*. Reaching back to the beginning of the 19th century, the history of the term is long and rich in shades of different meanings. Moreover, nowadays this notion seems to be undergoing a renaissance in the field of anthropology, feminism and literary criticism as an important predicament of the post modern human condition. All things considered, it may be interesting to investigate the Japanese realization of the *flâneur* figure in Kajii’s short story.

The notion first appeared in French pamphlets and in dictionaries around the year 1808 carrying a pejorative meaning, describing those who were excluded from, or did not have a set position in the feudal society; that is the homeless, the vagrants, those with no permanent address and occupation. In the middle of the 19th century the term also appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with a slightly modified meaning, indicating someone who wastes their time strolling at the shop windows. Soon *flâneur* became an extremely popular metaphor in the European literary tradition, finding its greatest realizations in the works of Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Joris-Karl Huysmans and in the grand novels of Honoré Balzac, Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens and Marcel Proust. Introduced into sociological discourse by Siegfried Kracauer, it soon

¹ Keene 1999: 537.

² Melanowicz 1994: 155.

became the central notion of Walter Benjamin philosophical essays and literary criticism³.

In Kajii's creation of the main, and the only, character in the *Lemon*, the most important aspect seems to be the Baudelairian adaptation of *flâneurism*. When the protagonist strolls along the streets of Kyoto, at some point he imagines himself as a fancy, dressed up poet, which may be the most direct, but definitively not only, reference to the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*.

In the essay on Constantine Guy's *The Painter of Modern Life*⁴, Baudelaire points out the most important characteristics of *flâneur*: lone, sophisticated and somewhat eccentric aesthete strolling down the streets without any specific destination, taking pleasure from observing main streets with its crowds and turmoil, as well as deserted alleyways as he passes them by. Reserved and distanced from surrounding people and everyday happenings, he is taking the role of an observer. Such a withdrawal expresses *flâneur*'s ambiguous approach to the society. On the one hand, he is alienated from the crowd, to which he does not, and does not want to, belong, but on the other hand he is fascinated by it as an object of his thorough everyday observation.

This description, with a little modification, could be also successfully applied to the protagonist of Kajii's short story. He spends his whole days strolling down the streets, which are practically his home. He confesses that, not having a place on his own, he stays with various friends here and there. One can say that he is homeless in a way that all *flâneurs* are. Practically the only activity which probably takes place in the enclosed space of "home" is playing with the Nankin beads, which reminds him of his childhood. This somewhat eccentric pastime bears resemblance to the decadent search of unusual pleasures and syneesthetic exaltations, typical for ultra-sensitive aesthetes, portrayed in the novels of Oscar Wilde and Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Interesting is the fact that, unlike the French or British *flâneurs* who fancied crowded streets with their *theatrum* of people, Kajii's character prefers not the main street turmoil but deserted back alleys with collapsed stone walls, deteriorating little stores and shady corners. Could this particularity of the Japanese *flâneurism* be traced to the classical aesthetics with their notion of *sabi*; the apotheosis of the imperfect and impermanent beauty? Or is it the consequence of a peculiarity of decadent taste, the

³ On the *flâneur* notion and its transformations see: Dzionek 2004, Loska 1998 and Zielnicki 1999: 99.

⁴ Baudelaire 1998: 15.

overwhelming feeling of tiredness and boredom with the culture and its glare? Regardless, the city of Kyoto seen through the eyes of the protagonist seems to be an entire space of his life and in a way it becomes the important theme in the short story. The character wanders the labyrinth of avenues and alleys in endless search of new stimuli that would attract him. And again, his attitude towards the city is ambiguous; on the one hand he is fascinated by its sober dark allure and decay, on the other hand he wishes he would be somewhere else. He can call it Sendai or Nagasaki, but eventually what he longs for is someplace *else*, someplace new which he does not already know. He believes that in such a place his yearning for social withdrawal and anonymity would be finally granted. Roaming his way through Kyoto, he gives the reins to his imagination until he loses himself, and dissolves his consciousness in the semi-imaginary world. It seems that the character does not always remember where he is or where he went, which is considered by him as a pleasant feeling. Becoming lost in a city is one of the greatest pleasures of all *flâneurs*.

The phenomenon of *flâneurism* is often connected with the transformation towards the wane of the places considered to be centres, ongoing in European cities at the decline of 19th and beginning of 20th century⁵. The *agora*, or main square, is no longer the centre of the city, since there is no centre as such; there is “only” a plethora of streets, alleys and avenues, each of them having a unique character. The city centre is not a destination any more. The “getting there” idea deteriorates and is eventually replaced by the idea of street-strolling in leisure search of something to become the symbolic *centre* (of the passer-by attention). The non-centric character of Japanese cities, mentioned by Roland Barthes in *The Empire of Signs*, seems to be propitious to the *flâneurs*.

Another extremely important aspect is shared by European modernist subjects and *Lemon's* protagonist. It is the way in which the erudite perceives phenomena surrounding him, filtered through art, as in the famous aphorism by Oscar Wilde. Kajii's character, equally versed in both Chinese classics and European mythology, experiences sensual stimuli as aesthetic - sometimes syneesthetic - pleasures, associated with art works, music or poetry. The piles of fresh fruit on the display appear to be an allegro, turned into stone by Gorgon. The character's reaction caused by inhaling the smell of a lemon recalls expressions from *kanbun* stories, learned long ago. Similarly purely aesthetic was his past fascination with the goods of a Maruzen department store: exclusive knick-knacks and books, attracting him only for their visual allure, regardless of their usage

⁵ Sławek 1997: 40.

or contents. As the melancholy, tiredness and ennui with the material and social aspects of Maruzen grew stronger, the modus of experiencing beauty become even more sophisticated and directed towards different objects. It was either nature (a fruit, a *canna* flower blooming among littered back alleys) or cheap everyday articles. Admiration towards fireworks is a great example of the peculiarity of the character's taste. It wasn't the explosions, not even the fireworks themselves, that seemed so attractive; it was the cheap, colourful paper wraps and their names that evoked imaginary representations, the realization of which would always be a disappointment no matter what.

And that leads to the most interesting and crucial feature of Kyoto *flâneur*, who like most modernist characters suffers from indeterminate, overwhelming gloom. The *etai no shirenai katamari* (*indeterminate evil*) leitmotiv, repeated in the text several times, is what makes the protagonist stroll the streets and stare at shop windows in search of something that would ease his depression and melancholy.

Melancholy, spleen, bottomless boredom with poetry and music, with everything that used to please him in the past and now lost its lure is symbolized by Maruzen. The depressing character of this place is even more obvious considering present physical and material condition of Kajii's protagonist. Suffering from lung disease, wasted away with constant fever and chased by ever-increasing debts, he pursues his restless daily vagrancy driven by strange anxiety. And as it is seemly for a *flâneur*, on the streets of Kyoto he finally finds what is needed to ease his pain: a lemon.

A petty thing - a fruit - enchants him so much with its simple, yet intense and perfect beauty, that it is able to dissipate overwhelming melancholy. At the same time it becomes such a strong aesthetic stimulus, that he decides to take it to the odious Maruzen – “necropolis” of beauty and art which ceased to be of value. And then, among dusty bookshelves he comes up with an idea to leave the fruit in there, to plant the lemon bomb in the hateful department store. He does it in order to either symbolically destroy pathetic remaining of the beauty which used to enchant him so much, or maybe in order to bring it back to life with the power of his new fascination. Either way, Kajii's protagonist seems to succeed, since the melancholy eases and he cannot help smiling as he walks away down the Kyōgoku street.

Lemon is a fascinating short story, in which Kajii Motojirō created a portrait of a plunged in melancholy and spleen aesthete in his quest for always new thrills. The usage of the *flâneur* notion is only one from many

possible approaches to this text, yet it is of great use when investigating the modernist character of Kajii's prose. At the same time, this rich in many meanings realization of the *flâneur* topos – the passer-by, the decadent, the plotter – seems to be interesting in the comparative perspective with reference to European literature and might be of use in further studies on this ever-popular notion.

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